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REVIEW

How to define valvular atrial fibrillation?



Comment définir la fibrillation atriale valvulaire ?

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Received 3 June 2015; accepted 8 June 2015

Available online 14 July 2015

KEYWORDS

Atrial fibrillation;
Valve disease;
Stroke

Summary Atrial fibrillation (AF) confers a substantial risk of stroke. Recent trials comparing vitamin K antagonists (VKAs) with non-vitamin K antagonist oral anticoagulants (NOACs) in AF were performed among patients with so-called “non-valvular” AF. The distinction between “valvular” and “non-valvular” AF remains a matter of debate. Currently, “valvular AF” refers to patients with mitral stenosis or artificial heart valves (and valve repair in North American guidelines only), and should be treated with VKAs. Valvular heart diseases, such as mitral regurgitation, aortic stenosis (AS) and aortic insufficiency, do not result in conditions of low flow in the left atrium, and do not apparently increase the risk of thromboembolism brought by AF. Post-hoc analyses suggest that these conditions probably do not make the thromboembolic risk less responsive to NOACs compared with most forms of “non-valvular” AF. The pathogenesis of thrombosis is probably different for blood coming into contact with a mechanical prosthetic valve compared with what occurs in most other forms of AF. This may explain the results of the only trial performed with a NOAC in patients with a mechanical prosthetic valve (only a few of whom had AF), where warfarin was more effective and safer than dabigatran. By contrast, AF in the presence of a bioprosthetic heart valve or after valve repair appears to have a risk of thromboembolism that is not markedly different from other forms of “non-valvular” AF. Obviously, we should no longer consider the classification of AF as “valvular” (or not) for the purpose of defining the aetiology of the arrhythmia, but for the determination of a different risk of thromboembolic events and the need for a specific antithrombotic strategy. As long as

Abbreviations: AF, Atrial fibrillation; AS, Aortic stenosis; ESC, European Society of Cardiology; LA, Left atrium; NOAC, Non-vitamin K antagonist oral anticoagulant; TAVI, Transcatheter aortic valve implantation; VKA, Vitamin K antagonist.

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MOTS CLÉS

Fibrillation atriale ;
Valvulopathie ;
Accident vasculaire
cérébral

there is no better new term or widely accepted definition, "valvular AF" refers to patients with mitral stenosis or artificial heart valves. Patients with "non-valvular AF" may have other types of valvular heart disease. One should emphasize that "non-valvular AF" does not exclude patients with some types of valvular heart disease from therapy with NOACs.

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Background

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is the most common arrhythmia, and confers a substantial risk of stroke. In the absence of anticoagulation, thromboembolic risk ranges from < 1% per year – similar to the background risk of the age-matched population – to > 20% per year. The risk of stroke and systemic embolism in AF may be assessed by simple clinical risk factors and scoring systems [1]. This has led to the wide use of oral anticoagulation as a preventive strategy for most patients with AF, unless clearly at very low risk [1,2]. The recent availability of non-vitamin K antagonist oral anticoagulants (NOACs) is likely to increase the number of AF patients efficiently treated for stroke prevention. Recent trials comparing vitamin K antagonists (VKAs) with NOACs in AF were performed among patients with so-called "non-valvular" AF, and excluded patients at high risk of thromboembolism,

such as those with AF accompanying mitral stenosis or with mechanical prosthetic valves. Beyond the higher risk of stroke and ethical issues in the clinical development of NOACs, a reason for excluding these patients in trials testing NOACs was the possibility that the pathogenesis of thromboembolism may be substantially different from that in other AF patients. The distinction between "valvular" AF and "non-valvular" AF still remains a matter of debate, however, with different designations adopted in the literature.

We discuss the definitions of the terms "valvular" and "non-valvular" AF in different trials with NOACs and in current guidelines. We also review the thromboembolic risk associated with AF in the presence of the various valve diseases, and the qualitative type of possible thrombus in such conditions. All of these factors may have implications for clinical practice and future investigations.

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